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M. Vaidy

René: A Memory

1940

The smell of urine from unwashed diapers, mixed with wafts of sautéed onions hit your nose first when you entered the dwellings of my friend, Junior's family. As you recovered, eventually you discerned also other odors joining the fray; the bodily exhalations of unventilated quarters, challenging the dominance of the first waft.

In the one and a half room apartment of my friend eight people lived and worked. The room served as living, dining, and bedroom and as workshop as well, with three machines of embroidery contributing their noise to the ensemble of the family. It is late Fall, and the need to save the precious heat of the oven prevails over any hunger for fresh air.

I am about 12 ys. old, and my friend, named Junior, is 8 ms. my senior and considerably taller than me. In the secular school, where only age matters, he is one grade above me, but in the Talmud classes, which are more important, and classified according to standing in the studies, I am two grades above him. Junior is by no means stupid, however, but he is subdued and timid, 'depressed', you may call him today. He spoke in a soft, barely audible voice, as if afraid to provoke the threatening world of adults, and to keep his secrets from them. By the way, it was with Junior that I remember having shared the freshly discovered secrets of sex and procreation, probably some years earlier. Junior's main objection to my revelation was, that, yes, he also had heard similar rumors, but had dismissed them as implausible, for how could his parents have made love unnoticed in their crowded apartment?

Junior had two older sisters, Esther 16, and René, 14, who had already joined their father at the embroidery machines after having completed their 8 years of schooling. There were three additional younger ones after Junior, contributing their odors and noise to the bouquet of the dwelling.

My real motive of coming here is, besides my friend, his older sister René, whose secret admirer I am. René has Tizian red, curly hair, freckled face and willowy figure, like that of a balet dancer. She loves to dance and sing, whenever she could, in the brief breathing pauses of her workday. She had been also an outstanding student, not like my friend, her brother.

The mother, emaciated, with a nervous tick, looking 10 years older than the father, always sits next to the oven with the baby in her lap. She is sickly, probably tubercular. The father around forty, looks and acts still vigorous, but his back already bent from bending over the machine, almost a hunchback. In his youthful attitudes, however, he is closer to his daughters than to this wife. He banters and jokes with them as if they were his peers. Later on I discovered to my surprise from a borrowed volume, that the father had been, once in his youth, a Talmud scholar, but under the yoke of his family he couldn't afford the luxury of studying any more.

In this crowded environment I never found the opportunity to even talk alone with René, until four years later when the air raids started, and we met a couple of times in the relative intimacy of the air raid shelter.

January 1945: It has been an eventful year for the Jews; most were sent to their death in concentration camps, only a small fraction survived in the ghetto of the capital, where only the Russian siege prevented their deportation to Germany. I arrived back to my hometown while the fighting was still on, in a Russian army truck, looking for survivors. I had heard rumors that my father had escaped deportation. The rumor turned out to be false. He was already on his way to a concentration camp.

The Germans with Hungarian Nazis were still holed up on the other side of the Danube, and bombarding the part of the city just occupied by the Russian troops, and we found ourselves just in the middle of a German air raid. After the fighting subsided, I went to see our old apartment building, which lay in the designated ghetto. I knew, that I couldn't expect to find there any other than sick or dying people, since the whole city had been starving during the long siege, so what could you expect in the ghetto, whose inhabitants had been condemned to death? There was no house that remained intact in the fierce house to house fighting. In a square I used to pass daily as a child on my way to school, there were still heaps of decaying corpses, the smell of which hit you strongly despite the freezing winter temperatures. The balcony of our apartment I found destroyed by a bomb, but in the apt. there were still people of the ghetto.

To my surprise, I found remnants of my friend's family totally emaciated, but alive, in their apartment, and my friend, Junior, sick and

dying in his bed. According to his mother, he was suffering from a pernicious diarrhea, and according the doctor, only some opium may save his life. But there was no such thing to be found in the bombed out city. The father and the two older sisters were still missing.

Some days later I came back, bringing some food that I managed to scrounge up in the starving city. This time I found also some other Jewish neighbors from whom I inquired about the fate of René. They said that they saw her. She not only survived, but was one of the few people in town who was not emaciated, and they saw her wearing Hungarian officers' riding boots. They said she had survived on the other side of the city, saving her life with forged papers, as a whore of the Nazi officers.

"Slander of envious neighbors toward somebody more fortunate than themselves", I thought, and made superhuman efforts to find and meet her. The picture I encountered at our meeting, however, tended to confirm the allegations of the neighbours. René's face was heavily made up, at a time when bare survival was on the mind of everybody else. She came of a strictly religious family, where a year ago she had still abided by the tabu against such a makeup.

We never talked about her past directly, but she seemed too proud to make any effort to cover it up. She was still the person I knew and admired from before. "And who has the right to question a person about the means she used to survive in hell?", I told myself.

I offered to smuggle her out with me from the burnt out city to the neighboring Romania, where there was food to be had for money. I was then in a relatively privileged position; I had papers and connection with the authorities with whom I worked as an interpreter. I had learned a passable Russian in the last half a year. She showed interest in my offer, but as the only grown up healthy member of her family, she couldn't leave her sick brother alone, she said. Upon this I made arrangements to leave alone for Romania, where I could obtain the life saving medication. The trip, which under normal conditions would have taken ^{one} 1 day, I was fortunate to be able to make in three weeks under the chaotic conditions of a country in war.

When I returned ~~after~~ from my adventurous trip, my first road lead to the ghetto house. They met me with the news that my friend, Junior, had

just passed away a week ago. It turned out, that the medication I worked so hard to obtain, wouldn't have saved him anyway, because in addition to the diarrhea, he also suffered of pleurisy, and that was that killed him.

The second news was, that they were preparing for the wedding of René to a young man whom she never even heard of three weeks ago. He was related to a neighboring Jewish family and was obviously willing to marry her without any questions asked, and immediately thereafter to set out together on the way to Palestine. It was obvious that they were eager to marry off the 19 years old R. to the first eligible bachelor, since she must have been considered 'damaged goods' with her tarnished reputation. Hearing this I was heartbroken, and avoided meeting her again.

Later on in my life as one obsesses at times about fate, I would beat my head: "Why didn't you have the sense at least to try to dissuade her from the fatal misstep of that hasty marriage?". -But what misstep?! I did have to admit it to myself, that considering my youth I wouldn't even have been able to offer her the healing bandage of a marriage for years to come. Not to speak of the fact, that I had even neglected to ask her if she cared for me at all.

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